

## **TECH TOOLS AND TOYS: ALL FREE ON THE INTERNET!**

**Dorothy Barr**  
Ernst Mayr Library  
Harvard University  
26 Oxford Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138

Today there are many tools and technologies available: blogs; wikis; RSS feeds; social bookmarking; all kinds of Web 2.0 toys; and many more. Every time you turn around, some well-respected library guru is touting another cool tool that everyone should use. The challenge is to sort through them, try out any that seem especially pertinent and useful, and decide which will be most helpful to you and to your patrons.

We'll look at a few of the more basic, tried and true tools that are readily available (and free!), easy to use, and particularly helpful in managing the mountains of information we all confront every day.

### **Blogs and wikis**

Blogs have been around for a long time, and they are very good at organizing information, keeping it available, and allowing it to be updated easily. More and more libraries and organizations are incorporating blogs into their websites to post current news and acquisitions, for example. They are also being implemented instead of paper or even online newsletters as they are much easier to update and keep timely. The original concept of blogs as personal logs has been transformed by these more practical uses, and we'll talk about blogs a little more later.

Wikis are another technology that has a proven track record (consider Wikipedia) and that also can be adapted to use in libraries. Consider implementing a wiki for your organization's Policies and Procedures, for instance, or to keep records of the status of projects. Changes can be made quickly and simply, and everyone who needs access can get it easily. Researchers could also use wikis for similar purposes – tracking projects in a lab, for instance. So both blogs and wikis are tools that can be adapted to many practical uses.

### **RSS Feeds**

Are you tired of getting email alerts and updates from all kinds of news services and websites? Would you rather have them collected all in one place online where you can go to read them at your leisure, access them at any time, and even organize them into folders? And would you like to do all this for free? That's what RSS feeds do!

Very simply, feeds collect new content when websites add it, and gather it all in one place for you. All you need to use feeds is a *feed reader*, also called an *aggregator*. There are various kinds of readers; all are free, and most don't require that you download any software.

Check out this BBC link: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/help/rss/3223484.stm>. I think it is one of the clearer explanations of feeds and it's a good place to start. If you scroll down a bit, you will see a box with links to various feed readers. The one I use is Bloglines (<http://www.bloglines.com/>) but you will see there are many choices.

Since feeds sound a little scary to non-techies, I always encourage people (even techies, for that matter) to start with something fun - a personal interest such as a sport, or knitting, or border collies – whatever, there are blogs and websites for practically everything these days. Once you have set up your feed reader, it is very easy to get feeds, with updates from your chosen sites (you “subscribe” to them). Just look for the little orange icons found on many sites and follow the instructions. Then voila! The news and updates to the site goes automatically to your reader, and you can visit it when you want and read what you want.

The chances are that you won't want to read everything that comes to your reader, but you can just pass over any that aren't of interest. You can just scroll through the posts and choose which to read in full, which to skim through, which to pass by. Sometimes you will subscribe to a feed only to find that it isn't really relevant for you; if that happens, the solution is simple - just delete the feed.

Another nice feature of feeds is that once you have read an item, it disappears from your current queue; but you can retrieve it at any time by going back to the relevant time frame. You can also save individual items by putting them permanently in folders (which can then be organized by topic); or you can keep an item as new if you know you will want to return to it soon. And feeds themselves can be grouped into subjects – Personal; Marine Biology; Librarianship; etc.

You can use RSS to subscribe to more than just websites and blogs. Many databases and publishers offer easy to use feeds. In PubMed, for example:

- Once you have a search that you like and want to get updates for, in the Display line click on **Send To**.
- In the drop-down box, select **RSS Feed**.
- It will take you to a page where you can name your feed. (The default is your search term(s), but that is likely to be very long and cumbersome.)
- Click **Create Feed**.
- Click the **XML icon**.
- Presto! It will take you to your feeder where you can choose from a number of display options.

Other places where you can get feeds:

- Most blogs. For example, library related ones like Stephen's Lighthouse, <http://stephenslighthouse.sirsidynix.com/>; science ones like <http://www.scienceblog.com>; etc.. Check out also the Biodiversity Heritage Library blog (<http://biodiversitylibrary.blogspot.com>) and of course IAMSLIC (<http://www.iamslc.org/blog/>).
- News sources –BBC (from the Science Nature page, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/default.stm>, scroll down to News Feeds, noting other options also), New York Times (<http://www.nytimes.com/services/xml/rss/index.html>) or just scroll down to the RSS button at the bottom of the home page and choose your feed; etc.
- Science sites – e.g., ScienceDaily, <http://www.sciencedaily.com> - this covers everything science, so it can be a bit overwhelming because of the number of items, but it's comprehensive and readable. There are also specific marine science blogs such as the Australian Institute of Marine Science (<http://www.aims.gov.au/>); the Virginia Aquarium and Marine Science Center (<http://vamsc.blogspot.com/index.html>); the National Marine Mammal Laboratory (<http://www.afsc.noaa.gov/NMML/>); and many more from around the world.

So the message about Feeds is simply: Try It - You'll Like It. And then you will be eager to share this helpful technology with patrons. It only takes a few minutes to set up someone with a Feed Reader and walk them through adding a couple of feeds. It's so easy that you will wonder (as I certainly did) why you didn't try it long ago.

### **Social Bookmarking**

This may sound very tech-y and Web 2.0, but can be very useful in organizing information and websites. Even people who avoid Facebook and Twitter and Second Life and the like can appreciate and use social bookmarking. The most popular site is **del.icio.us** (<http://delicious.com>).

You can go to the del.icio.us homepage and just search for the topic of your choice. But it is much more useful to register for your own account and then save the sites that YOU find useful and want to bookmark for the future. It is very quick and easy, and free!

Once you have an account, you can just select any website that you want to keep and tag it with whatever terms you find most useful. Adding tags is like adding metadata. It's good to use more than one to maximize your chances of finding a site again easily. For instance, you might tag something "Australia marinescience [note that terms with more than one word will be treated separately unless you combine them] pacific" or "restaurants fiji sula travel." Then you can find these sites easily by searching for any of those terms. Del.icio.us also shows you sites that other people have tagged in the same way, and you might want to add those to your account also.

Often del.icio.us will suggest tags, but the decision is up to you, so you can assign tags that make the most sense to you. And like feeds, you can save sites of personal as well as professional interest. So you can have a category of restaurants, further divided into locations by adding tags; marine biology with added tags for specific taxa or areas; etc. Using several tags seems like overkill but actually enhances your ability to find the items again quickly.

You can also download browser buttons to put in your toolbar so you can tag a site with one click or go instantly to your account. This is really a great convenience and well worth doing, because once you set up the buttons (it only takes a minute) all you need to do to add a site to your account is click on the Tag button and enter your metadata (tags).

Another site that some academics use is **Connotea** (<http://www.connotea.org/>), which is also free and you don't need to download anything. It is useful for reference management as well for those with limited resources,

Zotero (<http://www.zotero.org/>) is a Firefox extension that offers free reference management. It isn't as powerful as EndNote or RefWorks, but for those with limited resources the price is right.

Another popular social bookmarking tool is LibraryThing (<http://www.librarything.com/>). You can enter books into the site (using author or title or ISBN) and add notes. People use it to catalog their personal libraries, or to keep lists of books read and ones they want to read. However, it can also be used to keep lists of new books in your library, or ones that patrons have requested, or in a whole lot of other ways that are useful for you professionally.

#### **Other sites of possible interest**

- Feed 43 - <http://www.feed43.com/> - converts any webpage to an RSS feed.
- Meebo - <http://www.meebo.com/> - puts all your Instant Messaging accounts in one place.
- Twitter - <http://twitter.com/> - tracks people – “What are you doing?” (this is not for everyone!)
- SurveyMonkey - <http://www.surveymonkey.com/> - very useful not just for surveys but also for event registrations etc. Basic service is free; larger organizations may want to pay to upgrade.
- My NCBI – if you use any of the NCBI databases, this is a very helpful tool. It allows you to save searches; get updates either by email or via RSS feed; filter results of any search by type, library, etc.; save citations and organize them into folders; and it covers not just PubMed but many of the other NCBI databases as well. You can find it at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov> (or just go to pubmed.gov); the link to My NCBI is in the upper right corner.